Abby Rose

Multicultural Education

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My Cultural and Educational Autobiography: A Brief Analysis of Class, Race, and Gender

The most formative aspects of my upbringing and my identity that I can clearly determine the influence was my upper middle class socioeconomic status, my whiteness, and my womanhood. My education has been such a fundamental part of my daily life since I was young, so cultural autobiography will focus primarily on how the aforementioned facets of my identity came into effect in school settings.

**Upper Middle Class**

I grew up in a two parent household in a “nice” neighborhood in Madison, Wisconsin complete with two-story homes and moderately-sized backyards and well-populated city parks. Children ran around the streets in the summertime and walked easily to the elementary school a half mile down the road during the school year. I had a childhood free from worry about crime, hunger, and any prospect of poverty. While my day to day life was definitely shaped by my family’s socioeconomic status, the clearest evidence that I have of my class privilege came into play in the my education, as I have and had an abundance of educational wealth passed down from my parents. From the time I was five, my dad would take walks with me every evening through the cemetery to a local gas station to buy a candy bar. While walking, we would practice reading the gravestones we passed and the signs on the road; when I was old enough, he would help me run through my times tables on these walks, too. I was read to almost every single night between the ages of two and twelve by one of my parents, and because of this I have always had an above average ability to recognize the complexities of the English language. These routines I shared with my parents gave me a serious advantage in the everyday classroom environment and especially when I was introduced to statewide standardized testing in fourth grade.

In addition to the cultural capital I inherited from my parents, both worked stable nine to five jobs that afforded them free time and free headspace to devote to me outside of work. When I was struggling with homework, I could always ask them for help. Despite the fact that they didn’t always know what I was learning, their presence by my side was a great comfort; the rapport we maintained when I was stuck on a question helped me with my problem solving abilities. My parents were always able to attend important school functions and student teacher conferences, and I never doubted their investment in my education or their ability to support me through whatever issues arose.

My upper middle class privilege affected me socially, too. I never needed to work for money until I made the decision myself to get a job in high school. I could easily focus on my class work without having to clock in hours to support either myself or my family, and I rarely felt left behind with my friends who liked to eat out or go to movies and concerts. If I were ever to be interested in joining a club or a sport that required a fee, there was little question as to whether or not I would participate as long as I posed a good argument to my parents.

I remember clearly the first time I met my class privilege face to face during my sophomore year in high school when I met a girl named Claire[[1]](#footnote-1) while I was working as a peer tutor. Claire, a freshman, was white and from a working class family, a fact she shared soon after I met her. She came to me for help with algebra and I quickly learned that she was never taught to do basic addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. My family had put such an emphasis on my learning this that I never even thought that one could pass through school without learning these topics. Until my encounter with Claire, I didn’t realize that not everyone’s family was devoting time to their education like my parents did. This was also when I first realized that there were students who were completely overlooked by the same educational system that I had thrived in for years — an understanding that would ignite within me a desire to pursue educational justice for all.

**White**

Whiteness has been a crucial part of my identity since before I was born. My race was never on my radar until it slowly began to click in my mind that racial inequality is alive and well in the present day. The ignorance I had for most of my life to my peers’ experiences as people of color and my own white privilege plays a huge role in how I’ve come to realize my whiteness as key to my identity. In order to convey my privilege, I will explain how thoroughly it was inscribed in my education.

My schools excelled in practicing both liberal multiculturalism which “subordinates difference to the claims of a universal citizenship,” and commercial multiculturalism which “exploits and consumes difference in the spectacle of the exotic ‘other’” (Hall 3). In our curriculum, like that of a majority of schools in the nation, denied any other racial presence than whiteness. In my schooling, I was taught to assume that “real” history began with the founding of the United States and that although we had conflicts over race in the past, inequality was essentially nonexistent in the present day. Liberal multiculturalism was present with the fact that I never thought of myself as white because I was never taught to see color inside and out of the classroom. After all, we were all *equal,* weren’t we? As explained in Peggy McIntosh’s essay on white privilege, “[m]y schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will” (McIntosh). Any instances of racism I learned about were clearly identifiable acts of aggression. I never thought it was possible to be racist unless it was taught to me. I saw the school as a united group of individuals free from the evil clutches of racism, less so because we were taught that and more so because of a tacit understanding that everyone had to fit the white cultural mold and difference was discouraged.

On the other hand, commercial multiculturalism was clearly present in my schools as well. Every once in a while during my elementary school years (Kindergarten-5th grade), we would have a guest speaker come in a talk to us about their “culture.” My classrooms at that point were ethnically diverse (the infamous honors tracking system had not yet begun) and yet we only learned about the different cultures present in the classroom through these occasional presentations from outside visitors. For example, one guest speaker visited my third grade class to share with us her story as an immigrant from Laos. As captivating and educational as she was, that day was the *only* day that we really had to learn about the experience of being Hmong in our city even though there were Hmong students in all of my classes and Hmong Americans are the largest Asian ethnic population in Wisconsin[[2]](#footnote-2). The individual diversity that existed in our classrooms was never addressed by sharing with or learning about one another, only by rare visits from “*the* other” who came in briefly and taught a small piece of their lives. Our conversations about non-white cultures never took place on a local level, but if and when they did there was no discussion about it within the classroom between students, no sharing of personal stories. I went through many years of schooling without considering the different experiences of my classmates as people of color.

When I started middle school, I entered the world of segregated classrooms. I was slowly but surely tracked into honors courses and away from a majority of the students of color that I used to sit side by side with when I was in elementary school. By the time I could really begin to question why I saw mostly white faces in my classes in a high school where students of color comprised 45% of the population[[3]](#footnote-3), all of my classes were 90% white by my sophomore year and my blinders were firmly in place. I had already internalized the social norms of sticking to one’s own race in social settings—nearly all of my friends were white and I was never having conversations out of class about race. And even when race came up in class, we were not having discussions, just being spoon fed information and accepting things as “the way it is.” Learning about racial differences in school interested me, but didn’t really resonate with me until I was older and educating myself on racial inequality. As Michelle Alexander states in a discussion on the racial caste system in the United States, “[i]f you’re not affected, you don’t have to know and you don’t have to care. People go to the mall and they see black and white people shopping together, eating, and going to movies. Everything looks okay” (Alexander 7). The issues surrounding race in America that I heard about in my textbooks seemed so distant to me since I never had to confront the reality of racial oppression every day like so many of my classmates did.

**Woman**

From the day I was born to the day I die I will eternally be known as the baby in the house. The youngest by seven years, I grew up with two older brothers and a large extended family populated by mostly boys. In spite of (or perhaps because of?) the fact that I have constantly been surrounded by men, I was always inspired by the women in my life: teachers, babysitters, family members and friends, and even the parents of my close friends. My mother has always been the breadwinner of our family, and was steadily climbing the ranks of her job from the time my eldest brother (eleven years my senior) was born. Having an incredibly well qualified woman guide me through life assured me that I could be a capable, powerful being as a woman. My mother, along with her friends and my aunts, led me to consider and pursue my post-high school women’s education where I sought to fulfill my potential as an outspoken, highly educated woman.

Even though my mother inspired me and pushed me during my childhood, the combination of being the youngest member of my family and also the only female child led me to be silenced in my house for most of my life. It was not often explicit as I was never told “be quiet,” but I was excluded from many conversations that took place in my house from family matters to political discussions. The silence I experienced in my home led me to bottle myself up quite tightly and believe that I simply didn’t have opinions worth sharing. My silence was born in my home, but existed in school and social settings, too. I only began to be more comfortable speaking through asking questions in school, as I didn’t feel like my opinions were tied to my misunderstandings in class. My personal opinions only really began to bloom in the public sphere once I began learning in high school (again, on my own time) about the universal silencing of women across the world and across time.

A large of my motivation to become one of these women stems from my frustration with the fact that at a young age I was often taught that a woman’s work was seen as inherently “less than” because of the fact that it was produced by a woman. This frustration was especially evident in my interactions with my brother Tim, who I looked up to growing up. He is seven years older than me and lived at home often, so I related to him more than I did my eldest brother. Whenever I would make a discovery of a talented musician or artist or writer who was a woman, my brother would be disinterested or actively bash the person I recommended on the principle that she was a woman.

Additionally, comedy and stand up were big unifiers between Tim and I, which began as a relatively harmless interest we shared. We would bond by attending stand up together and watching specials on TV. However, as I began to get older, Tim showed me comedians who preached horrible misogyny. This is one of the most distinct memories I have of a divide forming between my brother and I. He couldn’t understand how I found these degrading and sexist jokes to be offensive, and my inability to convey my frustration effectively led to a deep fracture in my relationship with my brother. Being so close to someone who shares very different perspectives on women (a major aspect of my identity) pushed me to learn how to speak effectively about my beliefs while being in an emotionally compromised position. I needed to find the words to express my anger other than “but that doesn’t make any sense!” and explain to him exactly how flawed his thinking was. It’s still a work in progress to this day, but becoming more confident in my womanhood and my knowledge of sexism has helped me articulate my beliefs and more firmly establish my own identity.

**Who Am I Becoming?**

Although much of my short autobiography was focused on how my identity has been formed up until the end of high school, leaving my hometown, pursuing higher education, and pushing myself to engage in political and personal discussions has changed how I see myself more than any other two year period in my life. (I could honestly write an entire book on how my perspective on the world and on myself has changed since I’ve left home). I realize the importance of deconstructing racial and class privilege from an early age because it took me so long to realize my own. Education, be it in a classroom or in a conversation, is vital to me and a key part of my future profession. Upon reflecting the impact my education has had on my identity, I see its power to do both good and bad more each day.

Moreover, I am and am becoming someone who seeks to listen to the stories of others. I understand now how sharing my own story with those around me - be it loved ones or class mates or whomever - has helped me realize so much more about my identity and my role in the world. While conversation may not be the easiest form of communication for some, I want to emphasize to others the importance of accepting your own story as one with value and power. I believe that once you start recognizing your own individuality, you can better go off into the world with firm footing and start making changes in other people’s lives.

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1. Name has been changed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Public School Review, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)